

Birdwatching in Rural Southern New Jersey

By Elizabeth J. Rosenthal

Is Cape May the only place to go birdwatching in New Jersey? Certainly not. A day's jaunt in extreme southern New Jersey's rural Gloucester, Salem and Cumberland counties, home of soybean crops, sod farms, and acres and acres of young trees and bushes being readied for the local nursery, will yield sightings of early migrants and breathtaking South Jersey avian mainstays. Take my productive trip on a recent August Saturday as an example
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I arrived on Pedricktown Road in Salem at about 8:40 a.m. Pulling onto the grassy shoulder at right, I could see Lloyd Shaw, Associate Naturalist with New Jersey Audubon's Rancocas Nature Center, and a couple of other people some yards ahead, chatting. This early, the heat was tolerable. After covering myself with bug repellent lotion and getting my gear together (binoculars with back-harness, portable seat, snacks, and water) I walked up to introduce myself. I knew Lloyd, tall and skinny, a quick smile on a friendly face, from birdwatching expeditions in January and June. He is both a knowledgeable trip leader and a cheery companion. (Lloyd quickly remembered me, probably because I distinguish myself by being so pitiful at bird identification.) Today, he was talking with one of the birdwatchers in our soon-to-be-group, as well as Frank Lenik, Land Steward-Naturalist with Rancocas. Frank looks (and, in his soft-spoken way, sounds) a lot like Bob Costas. Lloyd and Frank were co-leaders for the day.

When all five participants had arrived, Lloyd excitedly announced, "I think it's time for us to head out!"

"Let's try to carpool," suggested Frank, an idea I jumped at given the state of the world's conventional energy supplies. He invited me to ride with him; I just had to retrieve my lunch bag, such as it was (cheese snacks and Atkins® chocolate bars), from my car.

After pulling out, we approached a curve on Pedricktown Road. Our eyes were met with many dozens of red-winged blackbirds that had left the safety of the nearby marsh reeds to feed on something delectable in the middle of the asphalt. They scattered as we approached, many returning for the time being to the reeds, to which they expertly clung, and watched us pass.

Our first stop was Birch Creek in Logan Township, across the county divide in Gloucester County. Amazingly, this remote, marshy area sits (or drips, undulates, splashes, and oozes) alongside Route 130, whose character is distinct here from its more northerly artery that bisects Camden and Burlington counties, where it is lined by diners, strip malls, abandoned storefronts, auto dealerships, and litter-strewn fields. Evident from the beginning at Birch Creek were the numerous (between 10 and 20) great egrets standing or slowly walking in the water, facing in different directions as they stared into the muck to see if some food might appear. Despite Lloyd's and Frank's announcements of other birds – a family of common moorhens, a spotted sandpiper and a solitary sandpiper-- feeding on a mudflat or alongside a reed bank, I found the sight of the many pure-white egrets, their seemingly hose-length necks extended as they watched the water with anticipation, their yellow, dagger-like bills at the ready, much more wonderful to behold. For one thing, I'd never seen so many in one place before!

I also liked the five dull-looking but cute female mallards. They are as common as, oh, people named Smith or Jones, but their facile swimming style, the adorable way they "tip up" when feeding, and their habit of shaking their tail feathers (which they originated way before rock and roll ever existed), make these ordinary birds irresistible to me.

A great blue heron on the far shore, big enough for me to see without too much squinting through the scope, was busy with a fish it had caught. Somehow, the heron couldn't get a handle on the fish, fiddling and fiddling with it, and taking small chunks out of it.

Back to the moorhens and sandpipers: it's not that they weren't interesting. Perhaps it was the distance that tired me of them. One could barely make them out with binoculars. The viewing was only marginally better with a scope. (Lloyd, Frank, and another in our group brought theirs.) I was happy to see the moorhens; I just would have liked to have seen them more clearly! It didn't help that they preferred the underbrush and only grudgingly came out to forage. The sandpipers were even harder to see, despite their long legs. They blended in too well with the mud over which they tiptoed.

Birds flew, too. One of the great egrets flapped its wings and rose, resembling a graceful simulation of white wastepaper fluttering haphazardly in the breeze. Off in the distance, on the other side of Route 130, a bald eagle soared in wide circles. Just a speck with the naked eye, binoculars revealed the beautiful bird's white head and tail. Suddenly, on the marsh side of 130, but far from the water birds, a red-tailed hawk, as if in competition with

the eagle, soared in a small circle.

“That’s typical of red-taileds,” said Lloyd.

But I couldn’t tell it was a red-tailed hawk, even with a scope. It just looked like a generic raptor to me. “You can tell it’s a red-tailed by its muscular-looking wings,” Lloyd further explained.

Done with Birch Creek, we returned to Salem County via Featherbed Lane, which, despite its name, was a real stretch of road bounded by farmland. Here, we saw more birds of prey. Emerging from Frank’s station wagon, he and I scared an American kestrel, the littlest falcon, from its perch on a telephone wire. We spotted a Cooper’s hawk, the great enemy of songbirds, in the air, too. The big stars of the sky in these parts, though, were the turkey vultures and their cousins, the black vultures. Most common are turkey vultures, the gargantuan black birds with the unfeathered, red faces (hence, the appellation “turkey”) and long tails that soar with their impressive wings, two-toned from below, in a dihedral (“V” shape). It’s probably impossible to turn one’s eyes toward the sky anywhere in New Jersey without seeing at least one up there, catching a thermal and surveying the land for animal carcasses. But over a farmhouse on Featherbed Lane, most of the vultures were black. (Their bare faces are black rather than red.) Our trip co-leaders pointed out that these birds lacked the two-tone look from below, held their wings relatively straight as they glided, and sported just the barest hint of a tail. The sky was so crowded with vultures one wondered what they hoped to see on the ground.

Down Featherbed Lane were cattle lazily grazing. Foraging among them were – surprise! - cattle egrets! Despite being related to other egrets, and bearing white plumage as lovely as that found on the great egret, cattle egrets’ legs are shorter, and they don’t frequent watery areas. All that these birds of African origin care about are cattle (hence their apt name). Why? Because, Frank remarked, the big, lumbering bovines, as they thump along, send up innumerable insects from the grass, which the cattle egrets relish and snap up. Within a few minutes, the egrets here, nine in all, apparently had had their fill, because, one at a time, they contentedly took off, leaving their gigantic namesakes behind.

Farther down the lane, we discovered newly plowed earth and at least three killdeer foraging among the chunks of dirt. Killdeer are a favorite bird of mine. Just as cattle egrets are related to water-frequenting egrets, killdeer are related to water-frequenting plovers, but are generally found on land, where they are especially drawn to gravelly lots. When they take off, they utter a plaintive, squeakily shrill “K-dee! K-dee!” which sounds a little like the made-up word “killdeer” so that, presumably unbeknownst to them, they must live with a curious name that is foreign to the way they look or act. Killdeer definitely have nothing to do with killing deer.

Birdwatching was becoming easier for me now that the birds weren’t so distant. A pond up Featherbed Lane yielded three snow geese swimming with a more sizeable goose, white like its companions.

“What kind of goose is that?” I asked, referring to the oversized one.

“A barnyard goose,” answered Frank. (I would have assumed it was a snow goose on growth hormones, even though it lacked the black wing tips that are diagnostic of a snow goose.)

A couple of double-crested cormorants swam in the pond with their distinctive, semi-submerged style. All we could see of them were the tops of their heads and their bills. Their bodies were hidden underwater. Another cormorant shared a snag with a great egret. Barely visible in the corner of the pond near an earthy drop below some railroad tracks sat an inanimate, discarded tire and its animate companion, a green heron, darker and fifty percent smaller than the humongous great blue heron.

Another wetland, the overgrown Mannington Marsh, distinguished itself by its huge population of mute swans, which floated and swam among the reeds in numbers several times greater than the quantity of great egrets we’d seen at Birch Creek at the start of our trip. Mute swans are troublemakers for other species, as they are extremely territorial. When these birds hold their snow-white wings out so that they resemble a fluffy, rounded-out, living room centerpiece, they are really threatening their rivals. I had to admire their beauty, even if they are not the innocents that one assumes from storybooks. The sight of a marsh filled with them transports one back to kindergarten and tales of fairies, gnomes, and the travails of talking animals.

Lloyd and Frank pointed to two Caspian terns rising over the marsh, and tree swallows perched on a wire. We would be seeing many more swallows shortly, upon reaching Cumberland County’s sod farms. But first, we had a bathroom stop at the clean and quiet Memorial Hospital of Salem County. Outside, fish crows, with their nasal cries so less macho, and less jarring, than the guttural *caw* of their relatives, the American crows, kept a safe distance.

The first stop in Cumberland County was a deep field filled with phragmites called, strangely enough, Bostwick

Lake. Frank said, "The lake was wiped out by a hurricane a couple of years ago." (1999's Floyd, I figured.) We climbed on top of white cement building blocks that comprised the beginnings of a dam that apparently presaged the future reinstatement of the lake with the help of the nearby Cohansey River. Why did we see no birds? Perhaps because they had plenty of places to hide. Also, the scorching midday sun was nearly upon us.

Sod farm country was obvious by the acres upon acres of stunning, green lawns and the funny irrigation system that kept them so stunning and green. Water sprayed vigorously onto the grass from several skeletally-built, connected metal contraptions, each exceeding the size of a tractor trailer and sporting a series of double tires along its length for easy transport. I couldn't stop thinking of the Wright Brothers' bony first airplanes as I gazed at these things.

One wouldn't imagine that an antiseptic lawn on the Johnson Sod Farm, sprawling as far as the eye could see, would attract birds, especially insect-eating ones, but birds were not hard to find. (With the aid of binoculars, of course.) Tree swallows were plentiful, their translucent wings spread as they scouted for food, swooping from telephone and power lines over the greenery and back.

Catching the eye of our co-leaders was a lone bird standing motionless among a long row of mostly stationary black-bellied plovers seemingly lounging directly under one of the tractor trailer size sprinkler contraptions. This bird looked nearly identical to its plover mates.

"See the bird's pronounced supercilium?" queried Lloyd. "Also, see how it's smaller than the black-bellied?"

What was this bird? The answer-- an American golden-plover! We were lucky to have caught it during fall migration.

"See how the black of its face and neck continues to its undertail coverts?" Lloyd prodded. "The black-bellieds have white undertail coverts."

I was mostly lost. A mere casual glance at all the plovers underneath the water's spray suggested that they all sported the same oreo cookie plumage. But after straining my eyes through someone's scope for several minutes, and battling a horizon distorted to wobbliness by heat and humidity, I could just make out the white supercilium that separated the golden-plover's dark cap from its black face. Its smaller, less bulky, size, was also apparent. But that unbroken stream of black? A casualty of my undiscerning eye. At least I could see the bird's stand-offishness. The black-bellieds stood in groups of three or four; the golden-plover, perhaps aware of its differentness, stood apart, aloof.

Our co-leaders spotted more interesting birds toward the end of one great lawn, where a border of weedy growth nearly obscured the heads of these otherwise leggy birds. They were four upland sandpipers, in migration like the American golden-plover, examining the weeds for prey. The birds' size could be mentally measured against and found comparable to the unrelated mourning dove. They even shared the dove's alarmed visage. But the upland sandpipers were taller with skinny, yellow legs that allowed their heads to rise above the un-mowed area they were examining.

We had to drive down the road, away from the plovers, to get a closer look at the sandpipers. The birds, in the process of climbing a short hill perpendicular to the weedy strip, however, disappeared. Lloyd and Frank expected them to become visible again as they descended the hill and moved away from it (and us). The sandpipers did better than that, returning to the top of the hill so we could see their heads moving among the weeds. Occasionally, their entire bodies came into view as they traversed some of the rich sod on either side of the weeds.

"Next weekend, you won't see upland sandpipers here, but you will see buff-bellied sandpipers," Frank counseled. "They're migrating just behind the uppies."

The swallows were still active. Lloyd surveyed a row of tree swallows, their tails to us, taking up almost the entire length of a telephone line. The bird that was seventh from right was a swallow like its companions, and preened itself like they did, but Lloyd knew it wasn't a tree swallow. It was a bank swallow, smaller than the tree swallow and showing a brown back. As we were all almost directly under the telephone line, it was easy to view this benign interloper and note its differences from its line-mates.

Across the road was another sod farm with newly plowed earth that had attracted killdeer, and its relatives, the semi-palmated plover. (Aside from size, the two looked the same through a scope until I realized that the birds with only one black neck ring rather than the killdeer's two had to be the semi-palmateds.) Lloyd was not surprised to see the semi-palmateds on dry earth, far from its typical habitat, the beach—but I was!

The big find on the chocolate-brown, torn-up ground was a dispersed collection of horned larks, among the few songbird species evident that day. The lark I saw best was resting by itself near a shiny, green tractor, far from the main foraging area. It blinked and turned its head, left and then right, to ensure awareness of its surroundings. Black, yellow, and white markings, chiefly on its head and neck, gave it a sparrow-like countenance. Its “horns” weren’t visible. (Perhaps this bird, in an effort to fight the heat, had slicked its feather-horns back.) Other larks were among the killdeer and semi-palmated plovers, hunting the earth for food.

What a nice way to end our excursion! Having sweated through the blistering summer sun until 2:15 p.m., Frank, who lives locally, led us to Richman’s, a restaurant known far and wide for its ice cream. We all slurped on the creamy stuff and cooled off.